

COMMENTARY

Thoughts about Thought Bundles: A Commentary on Jürgen Keil's Paper “Questions of the Reincarnation Type”

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Abstract—Last year, this *Journal* (JSE 24(1), Spring 2010) contained a Commentary in which Jürgen Keil proposed an explanatory model for cases of the reincarnation type (CORTs), suggesting that most and perhaps all CORTs can better be fitted into a framework of psi without the reincarnation or survival hypothesis. We present several features that should be considered in more detail before the pretension to explain all CORTs with the hypothesis outlined by Keil can be regarded as justified. Among others, such features include possible modes of how memories of a previous life might be selected and dramatized into ostensible personal memories of children, departure dreams, CORTs announced via mediumistic communications, cases of the possession type, ostensible memories of intermission periods between the two lives in question, CORTs which involve twins, maternal impressions, crisis apparitions, and the argument of cumulative force. Furthermore, we add comments on possible relations of CORTs with the Lamarckian theory of evolution.

The Spring 2010 issue of this *Journal* contained a Commentary by Jürgen Keil entitled “Questions of the Reincarnation Type” (Keil, 2010). In this paper, Keil has presented a valuable overview on different aspects of his own field studies into cases of the reincarnation type (CORTs). He has also proposed an explanatory model for these cases suggesting that “most and perhaps all CORTs can be better fitted into a framework of psi without the reincarnation or survival hypothesis” (Keil, 2010:81) and maintained that this approach is more parsimonious than the reincarnation hypothesis. The model he proposed is a slightly elaborated version of the model he had already proposed in previous publications in which he had outlined and commented on his first field studies

of CORTs (Keil, 1991, 1994). In these publications, Keil had postulated that thoughts or emotions of a deceased person could continue to exist for some time after death and eventually become transmitted to the relatively unformed personalities of some children, thus resulting in remarkable instances of extrasensory perception (ESP). The present supplements of his hypothesis consist for example in the brief discussions of maternal impressions and birth/death discrepancies, as well as in coining the words “thought bundles” (TBs in the following) and “thought pools” (Keil, 2010:85). In short, Keil proposes that “free floating thought bundles” (Keil, 2010:96) are emitted by a dying person which “may get attached to objects, localities, people, or situations” (p. 98), and might be absorbed by a developing baby by “pre-personality psychic absorption” (p. 84). After this absorption, the growing child will display apparent memories of the life of a previous personality (PP). Whereas this might appear as a restricted or passive form of survival, the important difference from survival proper lies in that these TBs would not possess “the ability to generate new thoughts, which are based on an awareness and interaction with the real world” (Keil, 2010:97). Thus, Keil proposed that the term *survival* is not justified in his model. However, like the concept of reincarnation, Keil’s approach is only conceivable within the framework of interactionist dualism, which in this case would comprise non-material TBs affecting the brain physiology of a fetus or an infant by the suggested mode of pre-personality absorption. A hypothesis almost identical to Keil’s was published a few years earlier by David Ray Griffin in his contribution to evaluating the survival question (Griffin, 1997). Griffin used the term “retroprehensive inclusion” to denote a possible process mediating the re-emergence of memories and skills in CORTs without relying on survival.

We thoroughly appreciate discussions that contribute to elaborating the difficulties inherent to explaining CORTs, and that aim at finding the most appropriate explanatory model accounting for them. However, we believe that any discussion with the pretension to find suitable explanations for most or all CORTs should not rest on short and rather superficial speculations, as is, unfortunately, the case with most of the discussions on the nature of CORTs available today (for exceptions, see Braude, 2003, and Griffin, 1997). In the following, we would like to draw attention to a few of many difficulties that should be addressed in future discussions about the proposed TBs as an alternative explanatory model for reincarnation. In doing so, we hope to stimulate a deepened elaboration of this concept, concurring with Keil that in many instances of CORTs it seems unlikely that relevant information was obtained through normal means of communication and genetic connections. In fact, we maintain that the explanatory power of hypotheses concerning the presumed nature of a given phenomenon can best be evaluated when assuming

the greatest degree of authenticity and evidentiality for documented reports in the sense of Ian Stevenson (1971). These conditions imply that these reports are accurate and generally correspond to how the events had really happened. If the documented CORTs should indeed be authentic and evidential, any satisfactory hypothesis designed to explain all cases must be able to account for them. Thus, for the present purpose, we assume as a working hypothesis that the published accounts of CORTs correspond to how the events had really happened, and therefore contain paranormal features. In our discussion, we also introduce unusual and comparatively rare aspects of CORTs which were hardly mentioned in previous discussions assessing explanatory models for CORTs (e.g., Becker, 1993, Braude, 2003, Gauld, 1982, Griffin, 1997), but which still need to be addressed in models that aim at explaining most or all CORTs. Such rare phenomena include departure dreams, CORTs announced via mediumistic communications, ostensible memories of intermission periods between the two lives in question, and CORTs involving twins. Although they are rare, they might nevertheless be of particular significance because they seem to complicate and weaken explanatory models resting on ESP or TBs. If a given explanatory model faces difficulties in accounting for the most intricate cases of a continuous series of increasingly complex occurrences, it is likely that its explanatory power decreases also with regard to the less intricate cases—whereas only such models which can neatly account also for the most intricate cases are likely to contain the most important element for the correct interpretation of the entire series of occurrences.

In the following sections of this paper, we sketch seven different issues that seem important for evaluating the TB hypothesis, presenting each one in a separate section, and we finish this Commentary by adding a few general concluding remarks.

Establishment of the Link between TBs and the Children

First of all, it remains unclear to what extent both partners, the TBs on the one hand and the fetuses or children on the other hand, are responsible for the selection and the establishment of the link between them. Who selects, who is active, who is passive? Given that TBs are said to be absorbed by fetuses or infants in pre-personality states, we would assume that the child's rudimentary psyche cannot contribute actively to the selection of TBs; they could not even develop a motivation. However, Keil's TBs would also have difficulties in taking the initiative of selecting. Although Keil's characterization of TBs is ambiguous, we assume he intended to express that TBs are not only incapable of generating new thoughts, but are also not aware of physical reality and cannot actively interact with it (the other interpretation of Keil's formulation would be that TBs are aware of this reality and can interact with it, but cannot

generate new thoughts based on these abilities. This, however, is difficult to conceive for us). How then is the link between TBs and the babies established? This problem needs to be explicitly addressed for conventional CORTs, but also for more complex CORTs such as those in which twins claim to remember a previous life in which they had known each other already, and have obviously chosen to become reborn together. Below, we present considerations on six theoretical possibilities of how the link between TBs and embryos, fetuses, or babies could be established.

- (1) The link is established through the initiative on the children's side, the subjects (Ss).
- (2) The link is established by the TBs (being still active after the death of the PP).
- (3) Both sides, babies and TBs, are actively involved in establishing the link.
- (4) Neither fetuses or babies nor the TBs are actively involved. The selection of matching fetuses and TBs works via unspecific if not largely random ways and a successful link or an absorption of TBs is only established if there is a mutual "rapport" of unknown origin on both sides. This type of link formation can be likened to two persons who get to know each other in their daily business by coincidence and without any hidden agenda, but who still find they somehow match together.
- (5) Other persons such as family members of the PPs and the Ss influence the selection and the establishment of the link.
- (6) The link is established by transcendental forces or entities.

Apart from the problems already mentioned above, problems pertaining to possibility (1) include the following: How and according to which motivation would these children select TBs? Why are the selected PPs often represented by individuals with a rather unpleasant life and violent death, instead of individuals with a more pleasurable life history? Or why are sometimes PPs chosen who are problematic for all members of the subject's family, including the Ss themselves? Examples of this are represented by the CORTs in which Burmese infants claim to remember the lives of foreign soldiers who died during the war in Burma, now known as Myanmar (Stevenson, 1983:216, 229, Stevenson, 1997:181, 1301, 1311, 1326, 2025). One might also ask: Why do the children obviously not display other (super-) ESP abilities, such as retrocognition, precognition, clairvoyance, or psi among the living?

Possibility (2) seems not in accordance with Keil's proposed model. Rather, it is close to Stevenson's concept of "psychophores" which was proposed as a working hypothesis for explaining reincarnation. Stevenson regarded the psychophore as the vehicle that carries a person's mental elements between incarnations (Stevenson, 2001:234).

Possibility (3) may be seen as a summation of (1) and (2) with their properties and problems taken together.

Possibility (4) seems closest to Keil's model. However, it remains unclear why and how the children should develop such a strong identification with a passive memory bundle of another person. Moreover, it fails to account for the many meaningful links reported in CORTs, such as announced rebirths of PPs within the same family and many twin CORTs. It seems that adding possibility (5) becomes an indispensable requisite for any resilient hypothesis based on (4).

However, (5) would run into complications when assuming that culturally determined differences of CORTs such as the different rates of sex change cases or the different medians of timespans between the two lives in different cultures represent genuine differences in these CORTs. For example, one would have to attribute a considerable subconscious ESP-ability to the parents who would have to precognitively know or determine the future sex of their babies, and to find a TB of a PP with an appropriate gender who died at a time that would match the timespan of intermission periods assumed in the pertinent cultural belief system. The parents would also have to make sure somehow that *only one* TB is attracted and attached to the child. In any case, determining a motivation of parents or other family members to attract TBs of certain PPs seems difficult in many CORTs regardless of cultural influence (e.g., see the cases of Burmese parents who give birth to children claiming to be reborn Japanese soldiers; see also Braude, 2003:181).

Turning now to possibility (6), it seems likely that any hypothesis based on it will not make CORTs more attractive for the scientific community than the concept of reincarnation. But because this "normalization" of CORTs appears to be one aim of Keil in trying to establish the TB hypothesis, possibility (6) will not be considered further here. In general, it would be valuable to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of all the presented possibilities with regard to CORTs in more detail. But as space is limited in this Commentary, we will only touch briefly on some aspects throughout the rest of this paper.

Birth/Death Discrepancies

The second topic we consider worthy of renewed attention are the cases with *birth/death discrepancies* discussed by Keil. In these cases, the Ss are born before the PPs have died. Keil states that such cases do not agree with the "simple" reincarnation hypothesis, but support his TB hypothesis (Keil, 2010:93). We were surprised that Keil did not mention the possibility that such cases would be in good agreement with the concept of *possession*, which is in close relation and in good agreement with the concept of reincarnation. In fact, it seems only a matter of personal preference whether one classifies the CORTs in which the PPs had died during the subject's gestation as examples

of possession or reincarnation (Stevenson, 1997:1095, 1142). There are even a few published cases of the possession type in which a PP seems to have “taken over” the body of another person, for example when he or she was in a state of apparent death, such as in the cases of Sumitra Singh (Stevenson, Pasricha, & McClean-Rice, 1989) or of the infants Sudhakar Misra (Pasricha, 1990) and Jasbir Singh (Stevenson, 1974). Jasbir has even related memories of the intermission period between the two lives and described how he had entered his new body. Thus, contrary to what Keil seems to assume, cases with birth/death discrepancies pose no difficulty at all for the concepts of reincarnation or of psychophores.

Memories of the Intermission Period between Two Lives

A serious difficulty for the TB hypothesis directly concerns the just-mentioned memories of the *intermission period*. How and why should apparent memories of an intermission period between two lives be attached to the TBs of a dying person? How do these claims fit into the framework of TBs emitted by a dying person? Such TBs should never cover time periods after the death of the PPs. It is especially interesting that descriptions of the intermission period share several features of near-death experiences (NDEs). In particular, the reports of the intermission period contain numerous reports of apparently veridical perceptions of what happened to their body after the cessation of vital body functions or death. Of 69 cases, in which the Ss reported memories of the previous personality’s funeral or the handling of the remains, 25 cases (36 percent) contained details that were verified to be accurate (Tucker, 2006:168f; for published single cases see for example Stevenson, 1975:142, 312, Stevenson, 1977:77, Stevenson, 1983:12, 142ff, Stevenson, 1997:212, 596, 1958). There are even a few cases on account in which the Ss have reported having met deceased individuals in the purported afterlife realm and provided information about them they could not have known by normal means (Tucker, 2006:172, Banerjee, 1979:117).

Departure Dreams and Mediumistic Communications Announcing the Rebirth of a Previous Personality

A fourth set of problems for Keil’s hypothesis we would like to emphasize includes so-called *departure dreams*. These dreams can be regarded as a subcategory of so-called after-death communications or after-death contacts which are not infrequently reported to occur in dreams (Guggenheim & Guggenheim, 1995, Wright, 2002). In these cases, bereaved family members experience a vivid presence of the deceased in their dreams, and the reputed deceased usually also convey a message to the dreamer. In CORTs, reciprocally confirmed variants of

such dreams are reported. For example, the young child may state that he had appeared to his former wife in a dream during the intermission period, explaining to her where he had hidden money (Stevenson, 1997:255); that she had paid visits to her previous son in dreams when he was in difficulties (Stevenson, 1997:594); or that he had pointed in a dream to secret activities of other family members previously unknown to the dreamer, his previous mother (Stevenson, 1975:328). In these cases, the named members of the former families had confirmed having had such dreams. In the category of departure dreams, a deceased individual appears to one or more members of the previous family in dreams and announces his or her rebirth into another family (Stevenson, 2001:100). Also, a deceased individual may occur in a dream of a member of the former family shortly *after* he or she was born as the new subject. At times, the rebirth of a deceased family member was also announced in a dream in which a third person like “an old man in white” described the future family (Stevenson, 1983:245). At present, we are aware of 15 cases that contain one or two departure dreams (e.g., Rawat & Rivas, 2007:160, Stevenson, 1980:44, Stevenson, 1997:727, 750, 1114, 1603, 1700, 1718, Stevenson, 2001:100, Stevenson, 2003:102). Some of the cases that include departure dreams involve additional dreams of corresponding content that members of the future family had, so-called *announcing dreams* (e.g., Stevenson, 1983:281, Stevenson 1997:703).¹ In at least one case, both a departure dream and an announcing dream also corresponded to “very vivid” intermission period memories of the subject (Stevenson, 1983:244f). Whereas the apparently not uncommon announcing dreams might be explained by some kind of precognition on behalf of the members of the future family or as effects of the TBs which might already hover around these persons, the obviously much rarer reciprocally confirmed dreams in CORTs and also the departure dreams are not that easily explained. For example, why and how should a TB of a dying person without the ability to generate new thoughts and without awareness of the physical world announce his or her rebirth into a certain family in a dream, often providing sufficient information to identify this future family? Should we rather interpret these dreams as personified and dramatized acts of precognition or clairvoyance on the part of members of the former family who somehow sensed that TBs of the deceased PP were or will be absorbed and personified by the future subject? There are also three cases in which the PPs communicated their dissatisfaction with the newborn infant’s situation in dreams that members of the previous family had (Stevenson, 2001:100). This would represent a rather unusual form of clairvoyance, given that these nonverbal neonates would only have absorbed passive mental relics of the PPs. Might it not be more rational to assume an at least rudimentary awareness of this reality and an activity on the part of the TBs? If yes, how would that concept differ from the concept of psychophores?

A very similar problem concerns at least 14 CORTs in which the birth of a subject was announced via *mediumistic communications*, usually by personalities speaking through the mediums who claimed to be the PPs (e.g., Hassler, 2011:132, 157, Muller, 1970:190, 192, 229, 235, Playfair, 1975:232, 233, Playfair, 2006:5, 34f, Stevenson, 1974:203, Stevenson, 1997:727, 797, 829, Stevenson, 2003:24, 42). Are we to assume that an unconscious split-personality of the medium simulates the PP with the telepathically mediated subconscious help of the other sitters' minds, attracts the TBs emitted by the PP, and later attaches them to a fetus of the correct mother so that the right baby will be born at the predicted time? Or, in the cases in which the gestation of the child was already in progress: Did the medium sense per ESP that the TBs were already attached to a fetus of a sitter, and simulate the purported communications of the PP? Controversial as these cases might be, they should be addressed when explanatory models with the pretension to explain all CORTs are proposed. The same applies to two other related problems, namely the at least 13 CORTs in which *apparitional figures* of PPs were seen between the death of the PPs and the birth of the Ss, often expressing their wish to become reborn to the perceiver of the apparition (e.g., Muller, 1970:190f, 235, Playfair, 1975:222, Stevenson, 1983:177, 277, Stevenson, 1997:244, 667, 1244, 1458, 2091); and the cases in which the Ss claimed that they had acted in the physical realm and caused *poltergeist-like activities* from the discarnate state of the intermission period (e.g., Stevenson, 1975:312, Stevenson, 1997:183, Stevenson, 2001:112, Stevenson, 2003:24).

Twin CORTs

Memories of intermission periods also play a role in some of the most intriguing examples of CORTs, namely cases that involve twins. These cases also offer a line of inquiry to evaluate the plausibility of the TB hypotheses, if only on speculative grounds. Keil states that "If it can be generally confirmed that some PPs have connections to two or more Ss, this would support the suggestions that relatively disconnected "free floating information" from a PP may persist in time and may be absorbed by more than one S" (Keil, 2010:93). If, in addition, these TBs "get attached to objects, localities, people, or situations" (Keil, 2010:98) which facilitate access to them, and will be absorbed by a developing baby by pre-personality psychic absorption, it is obvious that (monozygotic) twins would be predestined to result in precisely such cases. Given the identical environment in their mother's womb and after birth, the almost identical time of their birth, and, in monozygotic twins, also their identical genome, one might in fact postulate that in such cases the TBs will be absorbed by both twins. Stevenson has analyzed 42 twin pairs and estimated that 18 of them were monozygotic (Stevenson, 1997:1934). Of these 42 pairs, both twins spoke of a

previous life in 22 cases, and in 13 cases only one twin spoke about a previous life. However, in six of these 13 cases the twin who spoke placed the silent twin in his or her previous life (Stevenson, 1997:1936). In no case did twins claim to remember the previous life of the same person, although most of these twin PPs had had some relationship, often family bonds (Stevenson, 1997:1937). Some twins such as the monocygotic Indika and Kakshappa Ishwara even reported previous lives of unrelated PPs (Stevenson, 1997:1970ff). From the perspective of the TB hypothesis (but also from the perspective of any other ESP-based hypothesis), it seems surprising that there is not one “double case” in the 42 twin CORTs analyzed. Should it not be the rule that (monocygotic) twins pick up the same TBs or memories, rather than that only one twin speaks of a previous life, or both speak of two different PPs? Moreover, one might wonder why TBs should develop the motivation to place the silent twin in the context of the previous life—sometimes, as in the case of Maung Kyaw Myint Naing, even claiming that he had invited the silent twin to join him by becoming born as his twin in the discarnate realm, a statement that was apparently also conveyed by the becoming subject earlier in an announcing dream of the future mother (Stevenson, 1997:1936).

Implications of Maternal Impressions

With the sixth issue on our list, we turn to more biological aspects of the TB hypothesis. First, it should be noted that *maternal impressions* are far from being “in good agreement with physiological changes” as Keil (2010:96) assumed. There is no physiologically relevant connection between mother and fetus apart from the umbilical cord. Although we consider the occurrence of maternal impressions as possible and even likely under given circumstances, there is at present no known mechanism by which a physiological instruction to generate a specific birthmark or birth defect could be conveyed through the umbilical cord to the developing child. Consequently, maternal impressions can at present only be interpreted as examples of macro-psychokinesis. Not surprisingly, contemporary medicine strongly rejects the possibility that maternal impressions can occur at all. Thus, it seems doubtful whether attributing the generation of birthmarks and birth defects solely to maternal impressions diminishes the problems—especially in CORTs comprising experimental birthmarks that correspond with the bodily marks of the PPs, but which the mothers were apparently not consciously aware of. Doubts may also rise with regard to cases in which birthmarks on the ears of the Ss matched the positions of holes pierced for earrings of the PPs (Stevenson, 1997:589ff), or to cases in which birthmarks of the Ss matched non-fatal wounds or other marks of PPs, or cases in which internal diseases of the Ss matched those of the PPs, or in which general physical and facial resemblances of the PPs and the Ss were determined

(for examples of such cases see the relevant book chapters in Stevenson, 1997). Such bodily characteristics do not usually elicit strong negative emotions, nor are they very pronounced and visually striking—if the mothers had been aware of such minor, trivial, and sometimes hidden details of the PP's appearance at all. Yet, as far as can be assumed today, the generation of maternal impressions seems largely restricted to perceiving striking anomalies or wounds that arouse strong negative emotions in the becoming mother. Thus, for us, it seems more reasonable to assume at least for those cases in which the mothers of the Ss were not aware of corresponding characteristics of the PPs that the supposed TBs also possess an ability to affect the re-emergence of the bodily marks of PPs by themselves. In any case, one might wonder if it is possible at all to draw a distinct border between the physiological processes that are associated with recalling memories, governing behavioral patterns, skills, the experience of emotions, or placebo/nocebo-effects on the one hand, and the psychophysiology involved in governing the formation of minor and larger bodily changes on the other hand (Kelly, 2007, Murphy, 1992, Stevenson, 1997, Chapter 2). It is very likely that such a boundary cannot be drawn. Then, there would be no reason why TBs should not also possess the ability to generate physical traits of the Ss such as birthmarks and birth defects. After all, maternal impressions would be caused by respective mental impressions, and we assume that also TBs could be conceived as a kind of “free floating” mental impression. Why should they not be able to affect the bodily development of a fetus after being absorbed? Contrary to the first five issues previously discussed, we do not think that the capacity to cause bodily modifications would pose difficulties for the TB hypothesis. Rather, the endorsement of maternal impressions as explanation of all birthmarks and birth defects suggested by Keil and also Griffin (1997) seems to add unnecessary theoretical complications to their hypotheses.

The Lamarckian Dimension of CORTs

Our seventh comment is closely related to the foregoing topic and concerns *Lamarckian evolution theories*. It builds on Keil's statement that “Lamarck's theory suggesting that some information and skills acquired by parents during their lives may be passed on to their children without any genetic or environmental involvement would also be in agreement with psi” (Keil, 2010:81). Here, Keil touched a very important and largely neglected aspect of CORTs, but we'd like to add a minor clarification. Although Lamarck and his early successors did not know about genes and the genome, they assumed that a kind of material factor which would have come close to today's genes would be indispensable for effecting the “inheritance of acquired characteristics,” the crucial element in all versions of Lamarckian theories of evolution. Yet, the possible mechanisms involved in the transmission of traits were obscure in all

early theories of evolution and hardly formulated. Among the most explicit hypotheses ranks the model of “Pangenesis,” put forward by the most prominent and influential Lamarckist, Charles Darwin (Darwin, 1868(2):Chapter 27). He assumed that little particles, the gemmules, would be distributed in the bodies of organisms and would aggregate in the “sexual elements,” thus transmitting information about the status of the different body parts into the germline and facilitating the re-emergence of characteristics in the offspring which had been acquired by their parents. Later, such hypotheses were refined into the concept of “somatic induction,” postulating that information about certain changes in the body are transmitted into its germ plasm (Detto, 1904, Kammerer, 1924). In fact, even modern trends of epigenetics revive and acknowledge the possibility of the Lamarckian concept of inheritance of acquired characteristics to a certain degree. One way this trait transmission is achieved seems to involve genes and gene products that can be affected by environmental stimuli the organism is exposed to. Accordingly, genes and related biophysiological factors still play a crucial role in presently acknowledged processes mediating examples of the inheritance of acquired characteristics (Jablonka & Lamb, 2006, West-Eberhard, 2003). Hence, traditional Lamarckian theories were not and are not in agreement with psi, but we hold with Keil that psi might yet play a role in mediating examples of inheritance of acquired characteristics in a broader sense. Another point we want to stress is that a central feature of Lamarck’s theory of evolution, even of its modern derivates, is the transmission of acquired *bodily* modifications from parents to their offspring. Thus, also from the position of a psi-inclusive Lamarckian theory, Keil and Griffin could well include the capacity of TBs to effect bodily changes in organisms into their theories without resorting to any form of survival, thus nearing the outline of possible evolutionary processes proposed earlier by other authors (for a brief review of psi-inclusive theories of evolution, see Nahm, 2007). Apart from these more general considerations, the reference to psi-inclusive Lamarckism in the context of addressing the survival question in CORTs might suggest another possible problem for the TB hypothesis. In all types of Lamarckian evolution theory, the parents are usually still alive when their offspring is born. The parents of many animal species may even raise many subsequent generations before they die. Consequently, one might assume in Keil’s model that persons can emit TBs also during their lifetime, if only “during the last phase of life” (Keil, 2010:96), or even only in near-death states such as prolonged NDEs or comas, but perhaps also during severe accidents and other kinds of emotional shocks and situations arising from fear of death. Hence, although one might expect it in the framework of the TB theory, we are not aware of any published reports of solved CORTs (i.e. CORTs in which the existence of the PP was verified) that involve memories of the lives of still-living individuals, not even

of near-death experiencers or survivors of accidents.² If, alternatively, TBs are only emitted after a time of definitive biological death: Why should that be, and how is this accomplished? In any case, this alternative would not be in agreement with Keil's hypothesis that TBs are emitted during the last phase of life or at death. In this context, it might also be of importance that living persons in acute danger or near-death states as well as persons factually dying do seem able to emit meaningful information, as exemplified by (reciprocally confirmed) crisis apparitions, telepathic impressions, or synchronistic physical phenomena observed around the time somebody undergoes a crisis (e.g., Gurney, Myers, & Podmore, 1886). Given these parallels, it appears recommendable to expound the possible relations between these crisis-related phenomena and the hypothetical TBs which we must assume to be elicited or emitted under largely identical circumstances.

Concluding Remarks

We conclude this commentary on the TB model with some more general remarks. For example, we are not convinced that it is the more "parsimonious" as well as the "simpler" approach (Keil, 2010:82, 96) to replace the single continuous psychophore proposed in the reincarnation concept with three separate agents who need to be connected by convoluted causal chains: (1) TBs emitted by dying persons, (2) fetuses or babies absorbing these TBs, and (3) unconscious ESP plus subsequent psychokinetic maternal impressions by mothers. One might even have to add a fourth, a fifth, or even more separate agents if departure dreams are regarded as dramatized instances of precognition by members of the previous families, if announcing dreams are experienced (first) by other persons than the mother, and if communicators announcing their rebirth through mediums are regarded as split-personalities of the mediums fed with subconscious ESP. However, we would also like to stress that the argument of parsimony or simplicity is by itself loaded with severe intrinsic difficulties and bears far less significance than is often assumed. One of its major drawbacks is that objective and appropriate criteria for simplicity can rarely be established. Thus, the argument of simplicity is often worthless and not more than a tradition-authorized mirror of prejudice which simply reflects the opinions of those who make use of it (Gernert, 2007).

When addressing the survival question, one should also keep in mind the traditional argument of "cumulative force." It was recently also discussed by Braude (2003) with regard to CORTs. This approach implies judging the best CORTs taken together, as well as considering the best examples of other sources that point toward the possibility that consciousness can exist independently of the human brain or toward survival, such as NDEs (van Lommel, 2010), correspondences between NDEs and CORT intermission descriptions (Rawat

& Rivas, 2005, Sharma & Tucker, 2004), cases of the possession type, hypnotic past-life regressions, hauntings and apparitions, mediumistic communications, and so forth (Braude, 2003, Griffin, 1997, Mattiesen, 1936–1939, Roy, 1996).

In sum, we hold that Keil's approach is valuable in highlighting difficulties with the reincarnationist concept associated with CORTs and in offering an alternative explanatory model to reincarnation. But if this approach is to be taken as an alternative that could justify the pretension that “most and perhaps all CORTs can be better fitted into a framework of psi without the reincarnation or survival hypothesis,” it needs more elaboration and refinement—for example, by examining in detail some of the best and most intricate CORTs published, by taking into account issues raised in this Commentary, and by tackling the arguments of previous authors who examined explanatory models for CORTs and concluded that some form of survival seems the most likely possibility (e.g., Almeder, 1992, Becker 1993, Braude, 2003, Gauld, 1982, Griffin, 1997). After all, we agree with Keil that there might be more than one explanation for CORTs, and encourage attempts to develop criteria to distinguish between the different possibilities by assessing critical details proposed in this and other publications on CORTs.

Notes

¹ Stevenson is not always consistent in his nomenclature. For example, several “announcing dreams” in Stevenson (1983, 1997) are in fact departure dreams because the dreamers belonged to the families of the previous personality, not of the future family of the subjects.

² However, one should keep in mind that such cases might be difficult to find because 1) they might be rarer than cases involving PPs who had factually died, and 2) such cases might have slipped the attention of CORT researchers, and/or were never specifically searched or asked for. Yet, discovering such cases would have important consequences. If only one reliable case could be documented, it would serve as a considerable support for the TB hypothesis. Thus, we recommend that CORT researchers should pay close attention to cases that might be indicative of children “remembering” the life of a person who is still alive.

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REPLY

**Reply to the Nahm and Hassler Commentary on
Jürgen Keil's Paper "Questions of the Reincarnation Type"**

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Is the Psi Interpretation Justified?

Based on reports and publications, I do not find it difficult to agree with Hassler and Nahm that my psi-based interpretations of CORTs may not be justified. However, based on fieldwork investigations of many cases over a number of years, the reincarnation or survival interpretation turned out to be less and less in agreement with the case studies as I experienced them. This is to some extent a subjective assessment, but one which I did not anticipate. I have some general doubts about survival views when they are expressed with a high degree of certainty, but on account of my association with Ian Stevenson—who encouraged me to investigate CORTs—and my high regard for his work, I expected that the results from my fieldwork would generally support the reincarnation or survival hypothesis.

The problem is that cases can generally only be found in countries with some acceptance of reincarnation. Without intentional distortions by the families involved, details are conveyed that are in agreement with particular reincarnation beliefs that differ between communities.

With rare exceptions, families in Turkey do not recognize sex change cases. Different communities have different views about the maximum time during which a rebirth may occur, and Ss outside these limits are not recognized. In a similar way, Ss who are born before the corresponding PPs have died are not generally recognized as rebirth cases. Variations of these and other rules experienced in different countries and communities strongly suggest that the cases that we investigate produce information that is partly based on perhaps somewhat strange traditions and beliefs. In other words, the results are based on information that was filtered and restricted according to local beliefs, traditions, and expectations. This may suggest that some of the information provided

should not be regarded as paranormal at all. However, it is much more likely that in agreement with local expectations additional paranormal information was ignored.

On page 320 of their Commentary in this *Journal*, Hassler and Nahm point out that among 42 twin pairs no S claimed to remember more than one PP. It must be kept in mind though, that the relevant information were obtained from very young children with the help of their parents or other family members. Occasionally other adults were also involved. I did not encounter any Ss who claimed to have information about more than one PP. However, we had not asked any questions that might have suggested that a S could have had a connection with another PP. It must also be kept in mind that the responses were obtained in family settings with no one expecting that a second PP may have been involved.

It is quite possible, in a similar way as sex change cases in Turkey—with one exception I encountered—were not recognized, that no additional PPs were recognized by Ss relatives because of their traditional expectations that an S can only be the reincarnation of one PP.

I do appreciate that many questions remain unanswered particularly with respect to the process by which a particular S is selected who has information about a particular PP and how the information was generated.

I tried to suggest that my assessment of a psi-based information transfer as the simpler alternative is a subjective one. Obviously, I should have expressed this more clearly.

Apparently psi-mediated information transfers (PMITs) occur quite independently of any reincarnation or survival involvement. That means PMITs can provide an adequate and perhaps simpler explanation for any paranormal aspects of most and perhaps all CORTs. More important is perhaps the more subjective assessment that the children who provide paranormal information about a PP do not seem to remember a personal experience. This is difficult to judge because family members often attach emotional importance to such information and this can create emotional responses from the children involved. Nevertheless—and this is again a somewhat subjective assessment—children are often surprisingly unemotional about the information they provide.

I do not suggest that my psi-based interpretation of CORTs can be expressed in terms that would satisfy all the concerns raised by Nahm and Hassler, but based on fieldwork experience I do suggest that paranormal information transfers identified in CORTs can be accommodated in a psi-based model—still in need of further refinements—without reincarnation or survival involvements.